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ABSTRACT

This brief overview of recent policy initiatives--in addition to existing statutes and regulations--that may affect the Government Printing Office (GPO) Depository Library Program's (DLP) role in the dissemination of electronic government information identifies selected trends that may affect the public's access to electronic information through the DLP, and it offers some recommendations that might be considered by the GPO as it moves into greater dissemination of electronic information. It is observed that the contradictory nature of existing initiatives encourages individual government agencies to disseminate information by circumventing the DLP and thereby contributing to the DLP's decentralization. Thus, the lack of a centralized agency for information dissemination will affect general public access and, consequently, specialized user groups may rely more on individual government agencies for their information. DLP pilot projects are currently testing the development of electronic information products which, when operational, may restructure the DLP into a more effective system. (16 references) (MAB)

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ACCESS TO ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT INFORMATION THROUGH THE GPO'S DEPOSITORY LIBRARY PROGRAM: AN UPDATE

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There is little doubt that the Federal government is rapidly moving toward increased use of electronic formats both in the collection and dissemination of information. Less clear is the policy context in which electronic information dissemination is being developed, the role of the Government Printing Office's (GPO) Depository Library Program (DLP) in providing access to Federal electronic information, and the implications of electronic information dissemination on public access.

The paper is not intended to provide an overview of the existing information policy framework or a review of issues and trends affecting the future role of depository libraries since such is available elsewhere (McClure, Hernon, and Relyea, 1989; McClure and Hernon, 1989a; and Hernon and McClure, 1988). Nor does the paper review the broader context and issues related to electronic dissemination of information government-wide as these have been expertly covered by Perritt (1990) and McIntosh (1990).

The paper does provide a brief overview of recent policy initiatives that may affect the DLP's role in the dissemination of electronic government information, it identifies selected trends that may affect the public's access to electronic information through the DLP, and it offers some recommendations that might be considered by the GPO as it moves into greater dissemination of electronic information. Overall, the paper suggests that electronic dissemination of government information is becoming increasingly decentralized and that there are numerous challenges to be faced by the GPO if the DLP is to serve as a central and successful access point to government electronic information.

KEY POLICY INSTRUMENTS AND INITIATIVES

There are a range of statutory and regulatory requirements affecting electronic dissemination of government information. Some of these government-wide statutes and regulations include:

- Title 44 USC 1901ff [Depository Library Program]. Agencies of the Federal government are required to notify and in many instances, deposit publications with the Government Printing Office for distribution through the Depository Library Program.

- Title 15 USC 1152 [Role of the National Technical Information Service]. Agencies may choose to deposit their information resources for availability through NTIS.

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- PL 96-511 and PL 99-500 [Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 and its Reauthorization in 1986]. Sets out general provisions for the development of government information policy. The 1986 reauthorization specifically encourages additional attention to government-wide dissemination activities.

- Title 31 USC 483 [Independent Offices Appropriation Act]. Sets forth policy that requires Federal agencies providing services to outside persons to be self-sustaining and that regulations provide for uniform charges.

- Office of Management and Budget Circulars and Memorandum. A number of Circulars and Memorandum have been issued by OMB that should be considered in the development of a dissemination program for example:

  - Circular A-130: "The Management of Federal Information Resources" (1985)
  - Circular A-25: "User Fees and Charges" (1974 and updates)
  - Circular A-76: "Contracting of Government Services" (1983)
  - "Second Advance Notice..." (1989), offers guidelines for the costing of government information services and products

- Title 5 USC 552 and 552a [Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act]. Outlines basic guarantees for citizen access to government information and the protection of citizen's rights for information related to individuals.

These are but a sampling of a range of statutes and regulations affecting the dissemination of and access to government information.

In addition to the existing statutory and regulatory framework affecting dissemination of electronic information there have been a number of recent initiatives that may affect the dissemination of electronic information and public access to that information.

- Reauthorization of the Paperwork Reduction Act [H.R. 3695 and S. 1742]. Considerable debate has occurred regarding this proposed legislation. These bills generally affirm the role of the OMB in the government-wide development of information policy but also provide additional guidance on how this policy development might occur.

- Government Printing Office Improvement Act of 1990 [H.R. 3849]. A key aspect of this proposed legislation is to clearly define government publications to include electronic information and to promote "cost sharing" in support of the dissemination of government information.

- Feasibility Study for FEDLINE [H.R. 4329]. This bill contains language directing the National Technical Information Service to conduct a feasibility study for a comprehensive inventory and authoritative register of information products and services disseminated by the Federal government and to assist agencies and the public in locating Federal government information.

- o National High Performance Computer Technology Act [S. 1067]. This initiative would put in place the National Research and Education Network (NREN). The network would be an electronic "superhighway" connecting the government, the academic community, private sector, and perhaps the public, to a broad range of electronic information.

These four areas of policy initiatives suggest that the Federal information policy landscape is a rapidly changing and evolving one. Thus, the role of the DLP within this context is also likely to be changing and evolving.

The existing statutory/regulatory basis for electronic dissemination of government information is complex at best, and confused, contradictory, and ambiguous at worst. Such a situation encourages individual agencies to develop and implement electronic information products with minimal oversight and integration/coordination with other agencies. As more agencies produce more electronic information products there will be increased demands for some type of a government-wide information inventory/locator system (McClure, Bishop, Doty, and Bergeron, 1990).

CONTEXT FOR DLP ELECTRONIC DISSEMINATION

The above section suggests that there is a complex and changing policy framework regarding electronic dissemination of government information. New initiatives must be considered within the historical development of the DLP (Hernon, McClure, and Purcell, 1985) and this changing dissemination context. There are three key aspects of this broader context to consider.

First, the DLP has never been a centralized dissemination point; it is only one of many mechanisms that provide public access to government information. As part of a study recently completed at Syracuse University, numerous public laws were identified that required individual Federal agencies to disseminate government information directly to the public (McClure, Bishop, Doty, and Bergeron, 1990). Such statutes serve to circumvent a central dissemination role of the DLP as outlined in Title 44 of the USC.

Second, the DLP may not reach "specialized" user groups who might be more likely to rely on individual agency dissemination mechanisms. Indeed, data from a national survey of users of academic and public GPO depository libraries suggest quite clearly that "users tend to be highly educated and can be characterized primarily as students and in professional or managerial occupations" (McClure and Hernon, 1989b, p. 44). Thus, one might question the degree to which the DLP currently serves all segments of "the general public."

Third, in the design of information retrieval and dissemination systems, one typically begins by identifying user requirements and information needs. No government-wide assessment has reviewed or coordinated dissemination efforts with an eye toward identifying gaps and duplication in meeting user needs. Such a review, and reconsideration of the role of the DLP in the larger dissemination effort is needed. Further, greater attention must be given to designing dissemination mechanisms that identify and meet user information needs as opposed to satisfying agency missions.

The electronic dissemination landscape is covered with a range of systems and products. However, it is unclear which mechanisms are intended to meet which information needs of which target audiences. Over the years, the assumption that the DLP would serve as the basic safety net for access to government information has been eroded. Future DLP electronic dissemination activities must take into consideration the changed dissemination context and the Federal and private sector dissemination mechanisms already in place.

In addition to these considerations, a number of key trends and issues will affect the depository libraries and the DLP's role in electronic dissemination. Some of these include:

- Increased Demand from Users for More and Better Information Services
- Escalating Costs to Support and Access Electronic Dissemination
- Continued Pressures on the Federal and Library Budget
- Need for Improved Information Technology Management and Use Skills
- Increased Direct Remote Access to Federal Information Resources
- Increased Proliferation of Federal Information and Information Dissemination Mechanisms in Electronic Format
- Ongoing Difficulties Obtaining Agency Compliance with Title 44 U.S.C.
- Private Sector Pressures for a Larger Role in Federal Information Dissemination.

Indeed, the convergence of new information technologies and the development of a national high-speed electronic research network (NREN) provide unique opportunities for improved access to and dissemination of government information without accessing that information through the DLP (McClure, Bishop, and Doty, 1990).

DLP PILOT PROJECTS

The Office of Technology Assessment's report Informing the Nation (1988) identified numerous electronic information products being developed and used by Federal agencies. Yet paradoxically, the DLP is still only pilot testing the appropriateness of receiving and distributing electronic information products. Five projects were proposed ("Dissemination of Information in Electronic Format...," 1988). Their current status is as follows:

- Census Test Disk #2: this is a CD-ROM product of the 1982 Census of Retail Trade and the 1982 Agriculture Census. The disk has been sent to all depository libraries.
- Environmental Protection Agency, Toxic Release Inventory: one CD-ROM disk, two floppy disks, and hard-copy documentation. Distributed to 550 depository libraries in June, 1990.

- Department of Commerce, Economic Bulletin Board: 361 depository libraries applied to participate in this project of which 100 were selected. Libraries pay only for telecommunication charges to access the bulletin board. Test period is June 1-December 31, 1990.

- Congressional Record: CD-ROM version of the 1985 Bound version of the Congressional Record. The database is currently being finalized (as of August 1990), disks will be sent to depository libraries Fall, 1990.

- Department of Energy, Energy Data Base: online version of the Energy Database. A selection of depository libraries would have online access to the database. Project is still under development and is anticipated to begin in early 1991.

All of the pilot projects are in the process of being evaluated by the General Accounting Office as of this writing. But while the DLP develops these five projects and waits for final evaluations on their usefulness and effectiveness, numerous agencies are proceeding with their own electronic information dissemination projects ("Federal Information Finds New Partner in CD-ROM," 1990)--most of which remain outside the DLP distribution system.

Within this context, institutional support for individual depositories over recent years has been stagnant at best. A recent survey of the regional depository libraries suggests that they are besieged with too many responsibilities and not enough resources (Kessler and Daniel, 1989). Agencies continue to initiate their own information dissemination programs and circumvent the GPO. The Office of Management and Budget "believes it is not clear that agencies at present have a legal obligation to make electronic information products available to depository libraries" (1989, p. 25558). And a history of Congressionally mandated cuts at GPO has injured its ability to adequately support depository library programs and services.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES

The GPO-DLP is still in its infancy in organizing and implementing electronic dissemination activities. Based on existing research and experiences from other Federal agencies, some strategies for successful dissemination of electronic information include the following:

Clarify Dissemination Objectives. DLP objectives for electronic dissemination activities should be clarified. Criteria for determining what dissemination products will be distributed, for what intended audiences should be better defined.

Successful Dissemination Efforts Require Resources. Realistic financial planning, dedication of resources to the projects, and long-term commitment to electronic dissemination products entering the DLP are essential.

Importance of Intermediaries. Successful electronic dissemination programs include information professionals who can deal with idiosyncratic requests, ill-informed users, and are aware of and know how to access a mazeway of Federal information products and services.

Access Versus Storage Technologies. It is very easy to adapt a stance of "techno-phoria" (the blind belief that new information technologies will greatly improve dissemination activities) given the range of new technologies that appear, it seems, on a daily basis. However, many of these new information technologies are incomprehensible to the lay person and improve **storage** of information as opposed to improving access and dissemination.

Incorporate Existing Research Knowledge. Some agencies have, in effect, re-invented the wheel in their attempt to develop electronic dissemination systems. GPO-DLP can learn much from existing research and the experiences of other agencies involved in electronic information dissemination activities--especially activities that did not work well.

Working Directly with Clientele. The GPO, through the Depository Library Council and other means, may wish to expand mechanisms for obtaining input on the types and nature of electronic dissemination projects to be included in the DLP. Ongoing interaction and evaluation from the clientele groups and the private sector can provide, early on, suggestions and opportunities to improve the overall effectiveness of the dissemination effort.

Explore Cost-Sharing Strategies. If the DLP is to obtain and disseminate a broad range of electronic products, cost sharing among the agencies, the GPO, the depository libraries, vendors, and users (as suggested in H.R. 3849) is likely. Innovative strategies for cost sharing as a means of ensuring access to electronic information need to be developed.

Clarify Cooperative Roles with the Private Sector. The efforts by the GPO on November 9, 1989 to hold a public meeting to identify opportunities for dissemination of Federal agency-derived information products and services in electronic formats for possible inclusion in the DLP were a good beginning ("GPO Public Meeting," 1990). New and specific initiatives for cooperative ventures between the GPO and the private sector could significantly enhance access to Federal electronic information.

Within these possible strategies it is well to remember that there are serious gaps among users of government information regarding knowledge of new information technologies. These gaps may occur among generations, across socio-economic groups, or by geographic areas. Thus, dissemination efforts that rely on sophisticated information technologies almost, by definition, exclude access by certain target groups. The "techno-phoria" of dissemination designers should not result in very efficient systems that are ineffective in reaching (and resolving) the needs of target clientele groups.

INCREASING ACCESS TO ELECTRONIC INFORMATION

The GPO and the DLP face increasingly difficult choices as they plan for the dissemination of electronic information products. To a large degree, they are constrained by the nature and types of electronic products developed by individual agencies. The degree to which the GPO can provide value-added features to agency products is problematical--thus, what is issued by the agency is likely to be that which would be distributed to the depository libraries.

The existing Federal information policy framework encourages a decentralized, agency-based, approach for the dissemination of electronic information. Depository libraries believe that this "excessive" decentralization of electronic information will be a major problem inhibiting their ability to successfully access government information (McClure and Hernon, 1990, p. 87). It is unclear how the GPO intends to combat this situation to ensure that electronic products are distributed through the DLP.

Also unclear is the degree to which (1) the GPO can get "geared up" to identify, obtain, and distribute electronic information products through the DLP, (2) the agencies will make their electronic products available to the DLP for distribution, and (3) electronic products are "user friendly" and meet user information needs. These are but a few of the issues yet to be resolved regarding access to electronic government information through the GPO's DLP.

The newly appointed Public Printer, Robert W. Houk, testified on July 19, 1990 (pp. 8-9):

> I have directed that the so-called "pilot projects" currently being conducted by GPO be moved out of the test phase and made an operational reality at the earliest possible date. We have a new staff member ... whose task will include a more aggressive outreach effort to bring new Government publications in electronic formats into the Depository Library Program. We have applied for and have received access to Project Hermes, a system for making Supreme Court opinions available electronically to depository libraries. And we also plan to build an electronic bulletin board system for libraries for transmitting Program information.... On the horizon are even broader tasks for the Depository Library Program, including an exploration of how the Program might be restructured in a manner that would be more conducive to this electronic era.

Many observers look forward to the vision, leadership, and new initiatives that the Public Printer intends to bring to the GPO-DLP regarding the GPO's involvement in the dissemination of electronic information. In the meantime, access to electronic government information is primarily through individual agencies and not through the DLP.

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